"The Royal Mounted" Analyzed

BY FRANKLIN FYLES.

New York, April 10.—Five plays making thousands of dollars apiece every week in this town for their authors, actors and managers present problems religious, political or something else ethical. Indeed, our dramatists have become so purposeful in their themes that the public expects something more than merely sentimental matter in every serious new play. The simple story of sexual love, with hatefully jealous rivalries and complications of fond misunderstandings, seems to have become obsolete. Nevertheless, that primary, primitive kind of stage fiction in "The Royal Mounted" brought into a Broadway theatre to stop a gap in Lent, looks likely to stay there till summer closes the theatrical season. This is the only output of new matter to write about, and so I have the space to interest you in it if I can. Are you an incipient and aspirant dramatist? Have you memoranda of plots, persons and episodes for adventurous lovers? Then don't throw your notes away; but choose an unfamiliar place in which to locate the stuff and so give a semblance of novelty to it.

The British government of Canada maintains a cavalry police force in the northwest; and to that wild service impoverished younger sons and banished scapegraces of the English aristocracy are sent. The hero of "The Royal Mounted" is one of those patrolmen on horseback. But he is Irish instead of English. Why? Because he is too blarneying a lover, too audacious a wooer, too buncome a bravo, to recommend himself to popularity without a mellifluous brogue to use in talking about himself. You may be familiar with the winsome Irish cheek of Chauncey Olcott. Andrew Mack and Fiske O'Hara, but you'd have to be as old as I am to recall the sentimental potency of Erin's accent as voiced by Dion Boucicault. Well, Cyril Scott, whom you have seen, if ever at all, in musical comedy, or more recently in "The Prince Chap," is now a Boucicaultan young Irish gentleman of the Canadian cavalry police in "The Royal Mounted." I wouldn't wonder if this Lieutenant Victor O'Byrne was born as English in the minds of his authors, and hadn't become Irish until, in his development as a lover in the snowy wilderness of Canada, he needed to kiss the heart, like a blarney stone, of every person in the theatre, if he was to be a stage pet.

Try to fix a few plot points in your mind. Cyril Scott, jaunty in the uniform of the Canadian military policeman, is sent to detect and arrest a murderer in the primeval region of British Columbia. He meets the guilty man's sister, who is sweetened deliciously by Clara Blandick, a young actress from who knows where? Have you guessed the complication? Yes; it comes of the stress of heart and strain of soul in O'Byrne, who loves the girl much, but regards his duty to arrest her brother more. At the third act's climax he must decide between his love and his duty. By this time O'Byrne has won the audience's heart as well as the girl, Rosa's, and we both hope and fear that, for his sweetheart's sake, he will let the culprit go. He won't, though, for isn't he a British officer, in whom dereliction would be treason? Although it will make Rose hate him, he ought to and will take her brother away to be hanged. The audience is sorry, yet approving, and sprinkles some tears on his sacrifice of love to duty. This is the same thing over again, and we should remember that invariably the hero shifts suddenly from duty to love, gives joy to his sweetheart and brings disgrace to himself. We shouldn't be surprised, therefore, when O'Byrne takes the handcuffs off Rosa's brother's wrists to let him go free and puts them on his own, to be taken back to headquarters for court-martial and punishment. Our approval of his adherence to duty is perfunctory, but our delight at his surrender to love is spontaneous, and on the opening night we made so much noise about it that the British officer and Irish gentleman was "royal-mounted" for a winning run.

This play of "The Royal Mounted" comes from the drama factory of De Mille Brothers & Mother, who took over the business of the late Henry C. De Mille, with all its plant of talent, experience and reputation, and now the firm has six plays in operation, while the brothers are actors also, and the mother is salesagent for other authors. An active family. They have provided for Cyril Scott the material with which to thrive. For those reasons it is worth while to consider "The Royal Mounted" as a hitting shot at the average of theatrical demand. As I sat in the midst of applauding first-nighters and saw their cynicism give way to enthusiasm, and especially as I listened to the thank-you speeches of Scott and one of the De Milles after that triumphant third act, I told myself that the knowingest of men and women are small boys and girls in a theatre, for there they were engrossed in a situation the absurdity of which should have prevented it from being a stage excitant for intelligent people.

Just analyze it. Rosa was assaulted by a bestial suitor while walking with him when he thought she was without defense; but her suspicious brother followed them, and, witnessing the crime, shot the criminal to death. What next would have happened? Why, the slayer would have returned to camp with his rescued sister, described his deed and had it approved. Instead he hid the scoundrel's carcass, kept mum about the worthy killing and behaved like a sneaking murderer. Then, again, when O'Byrne learned these particulars of the homicide, he didn't size it up as a praiseworthy defense of a girl's honor, which any jury would pronounce justifiable, but altogether unreasonably assumed that the brother's neck would be stretched instead of his hands grasped cordially when he was brought to justice. This would seem to show that a play may be rancid old in its motives, and rotten ridiculous in reasonability, yet be swallowed greedily if only the stale stuff be freshened with new and palatable circumstances. De Mille Brothers & Mother know their business.

Twenty centuries old is "The Libation Pourers" of Aeschylus, yet not till now has it had a stage performance in America, nor, I think, in English anywhere. Other Greek tragedies based on the legend of Agamemnon's assassination by his queen and her death punishment by her son have been preferred by students for representation; and one of them was brought out beautifully here by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, only to be disregarded by the paying public. "The Libation Pourers" was acted at a matinee by graduated students of the Academy of Dramatic Arts with small force of authority; but it was a fine exhibition of Greek theatrical art by Professor Charles Jehlinger, partly through his research and partly through his surmise; for the details of Grecian acting are no better known now than the pronunciation by the Greeks of their language. In one matter, however, Jehlinger modernized deliberately. It is certain that the chorus portions of the Greek tragedies were spoken or sung by men and boys on a platform lower than the front of the stage and higher than the audience. Jehlinger's chorus actors were girls, who chanted the exclamations, interrogations and descriptive answers on the main stage in the absence of the principals; and they were a ballet, too, for they moved and posed in graceful pantomimic groups. Motion pictures should have been made of these figures in classic draperies for decorative purposes.

The practice of putting songs and dances into melodramas as well as comedies and farces has been noticed in this correspondence; and now, in the final weeks at the rival two opera houses, by the repetition of works new this season, the disposition to put melodrama into grand opera is emphasized. Musicians used to think that librettos for the best scores ought not to be obtrusively equal in interest with the music; and not until the great works of Wagner did stories and their personages take rank with the songs and their singers. Subsequently, the literature of fiction, and the more romantic of plays, were drawn upon by the operatic composers. But not until the presentation of Maeterlinck's "Pelleas and Melisande" and Sardou's "La Tosca" as librettos for grand operas have we been reminded that the original meaning of the word melodrama was music-drama. The Maeterlinck play is symbolic and mystic with its plot of gore, but the Sardou piece, written for Sarah Bernhardt and used here by Fanny Davenport, differs from the writings of our Kremers and Blaneys in graces of speech and clothes, not in purpose or literal potency; and to see Scarpia's familiar assault of Tosca, with her killing of him, depicted by a man who utters his baseness in a low bass, and a woman who emits her fright in a high soprano, seems funny to a person more theatrical in taste than musical.

* * *

Within thirty rods of Broadway on a side street are five theatres with plays so prosperous that the bills haven't been changed since 1908 began. A sixth has a strong vogue with vaudeville at dramatic prices. Only the seventh, although big and handsome, is given up to week visits of tourists with plays of the lower grade. The block containing these seven theatres is crowded from 7:45 o'clock to 8:15 by people on its sidewalk and by carriages on its pavement. Saturday is modish as well as popular in stage amusements. As I watched the gathering in of the Saturday night audiences on this block, I saw that the usually almost spotlessly white faces of the throngs were mingled with an uncommon number of colored ones, from negro black to octoroon yellow. These tinted persons went into that seventh theatre, where traveling companies perform; and not all of them arrived on foot, or in trolley cars; for several taxicabs brought others finely dressed, and a big automobile delivered three pairs of dusky belles and beaux too elaborately garbed for anything else than a box party.

Negroes going into a New York theatre by the main entrance betokens a negro company on the stage; for at all other times the colored element is kept at the top of the house; and the reason why it was permitted to permeate the parquette there and then was that the Smart Set was to play "The Black Politician." A similar breakage of the rule is observable at the theatre in upper Broadway where Williams and Walker are on the stage in "Bandanna Land." It is a peculiarity of both these negro extravaganzas that the principal comedian is a mulatto, who has to blacken his face with burnt cork and enlarge his mouth with red paint, to make himself look to be of full-blooded and comical African descent. As I desired to make a close study in color, I bought a seat in the second row, directly behind the orchestra leader's chair.

The leader who came to that chair was a negro with no Caucasian blend, while the tooters and scrapers were the regular band of the theatre. It is usual to carry along a musical director with extravaganzas, else the singing and dancing would go wrong; and the local leader sits aside, playing a fiddle and relinquishing the baton to the visiting leader. But this time the white man was absent, and the black man, instead of wielding a baton, played a piano to keep the orchestra together, and only in cases of necessity waved his hands covertly to restore tempo to the white players. They had refused to work under a negro boss unless he leave out all tokens of authority.

* * *

Old in form, though new in some of its filling, is "The Black Politician," and its pulling power is centered in S. H. Dudley, a clever humorist in negro characterization, yet doing nothing singular enough to warrant description. The noteworthy things were the chorus boys and girls, who had been trained to eliminate their racial peculiarities, and behave just like white folks in similar stage employment. The opening sight, as usual with such plays, was a chorus and march, utterly meaningless as to its indistinguishable words, but serving as a showdown of its femininity. There were two dozen slim girls, natty in short frocks, and from the center of the parquette they must have looked white born. Not one was anything like a negress, or even a mulatto; even from my near view there appeared to be more octoroons than quadroons; and that impression didn't come altogether from lack of color, for a free use of powder and rouge had faded the nues of chocolate or coffee to cream, but from the fact that the faces, though prettiness was scarce and beauty absent, showed no flat noses, thick lips, or other betrayals of Afric origin.

If, now, this had been a problem drama, instead of an antic farce, the mingling of black and brown men with yellow and white women might have been meant to teach something—I won't guess what—but maybe Dudley, author of the play as well as its main comedian, intended to be ethnological by giving to the all-negro candidate for mayor of Marco, Ga., a wife who looked right for an all-white and quite correct matron in that Smart Set from which this Smart Set took its name. The opposing politician had no accent, complexion, features or mannerism to indicate negro blood; it was fairly supposable that the canvass was between champions of the two races, the blacks winning; and when, at the play's end, the beaten nominee gave his daughter, with lily skin and buttercup hair, to Dudley, the comedy black man, in marriage, was it unreasonable to ascribe to Dudley, the author, a purpose of showing, without orally teaching, a lesson in amalgamation? But what's the use? Better regard "The Black Politician" as no more than a clever imitation by negroes of the white kind of extravaganza that Cohan makes.

* * *

New York has no resident theatrical company, and I didn't know of a recent attempt to instal one until it was all over. All I can do is to quote Josh Darnett, whose failure led probably a hundred jokers to call him Gosh Darnit.

"I have a voice," he said, "and I've tried always, and all ways to make something out of it. I have exhorted at camp meetings, recited on the Sunday school platform, stumped in political campaigns, and acted Othello on the stage. Last summer I was an Ethiopian satrap in the show of 'Antony and Cleopatra' at Coney Island. Among the colored jockeys and stable boys who winter around the race tracks thereaway, I found considerable song and dance talent; so I planned the Afric theatre. It was opened and shut the other night in what in summer is a Coney Island concert hall. I am a mimic. Listen," and he gave extracts in dialect from Denman Thompson as a Yankee, David Warfield as a Jew, Sam Bernard as a German and Chauncey Olcott as an Irishman.

"As you know," Mr. Darnett went on, "every burlesque contains those four characters. My scheme was to assume all of them myself, thus saving three salaries, and ensuring good impersonations—killing four birds with one stone. Well, I feel like one bird killed with four stones. We had a mixed audience from the neighboring tough town of Gravesend. Yet my Yankee went first rate, my Jew almost as well; and there wasn't much murmuring at my German by a bunch of waiters from the beer saloons, but when I made my entrance as an Irishman! A real Irishman glared at me from a front seat. My imitation Irishman had been justly admired by my own people; but at sight of my caubeen with a sprig of shamrock in it, this fellow cried: 'See the black nayger wearin' av the green!' Then he sprang over the footlights and swiped me with his shillalah of a cane. That closed the Afric theatre with about two-thirds of one performance.'"